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Qualitative vs. Quantitative Standards.

By **John C. Weigel**, Instructor of German, Uni. of Chicago.

(Concluded.)

Another thing which we can do to stimulate students to their utmost efforts is by a process of promotion. Sometimes a student is exceptionally mature, can do additional work, and carries work with great ease. What we ought to do with that type of student is to promote him. Last year nine students were promoted in German classes of the University High School. Thus far this year, five students have been promoted from the second to the third year, and one student from the first to the second. Such work, however, requires much planning and guidance on the part of the teacher. The student must make up at least the grammatical material and be able to understand the reasons underlying that material. This must, therefore, be done only in the case of the rare and exceptional student, and with full realization of the responsibilities involved. Again small classes are a decided factor in solving such a problem.

Finally we may create a "flying" section for the very best students, giving them an opportunity to finish three or four years' work in the shortest time, commensurate with high quality work. The attempt of the French Department in this university is the only one with which I am personally acquainted as far as language is concerned. In case the classes in high school are small enough, this plan is not necessary. We have already noted that supplementary reading or composition may be utilized admirably even when sections are kept intact.

In my own work in the Junior College, I have from time to time excused the best students also from class quizzes, never, however, from final examinations. We should, however, in high school classes make such cases of excusing students from tests very rare ones.

Then, too, we might utilize our German clubs in other ways than now. We might make membership in the club dependent upon excellent class results. In this way the club would be considered a privilege. Or, on the other hand, we might limit the club to the advanced classes, which would mean the application of the same principle, since the later classes in a well organized scheme average much higher than beginning classes.

Schorling, in the article already alluded to, gives a very interesting description of a competition between mathematics teams, composed of "A" grade students of the University High School and the Hyde Park High School, before a very large audience amid extraordinary enthusiasm.

How this type of work, based upon the same principle as athletic competition and debate, could be utilized in German, I do not propose to be able to say. But some fertile mind may evolve a plan of that kind even for us. At all odds, it is interesting to speculate upon it.

These, then, are some suggestions of what we should do for the best students.

2. Now what shall we do for the poorer students? In days gone by, we failed the poorer students. And that, no doubt, we shall continue to do. * We are beginning slowly to realize, however, that even the poorest students have a claim to our attention and care. There are doubtless many reasons for failures, but two of them predominate. The first is that the quantity of the work is too great and the second that students do not know how to study. Both of them produce a lack of interest and consequently of results.

Mr. Breslich, of the University High School, tells an excellent story in an article, entitled "Teaching High School Pupils How to Study."* It seems that the parents of a student, beginning first year mathematics, complained to Mr. Breslich that their daughter came home daily with assignments she was unable to attack. She didn't know how to go about it. The student even declared the teacher had not given instructions or suggestions as to how to attack the problem. The parents naturally thought this unreasonable but nevertheless set to work themselves. When they too failed, they called in a ministerial friend in the hour of need and he too realized that he had not done things as thoroughly in days gone by as he might have done. So the parents indicated to Mr. Breslich that sometimes not even the entire board of strategy was able to cope with the problem. The fact was that the child did not understand that the suggestions given by the instructor were to be utilized in the work at home. This instance is by no means as rare as one thinks. In this case, the parents were satisfied by Mr. Breslich as to his procedure, but it set him thinking. He introduced therefore a system whereby all studying was done in the school and under his supervision. The first time he gave merely the directions to begin work. He found that it took some students all of fifteen minutes to get started. They seemed unable to know what to do or how to do it.

Now all of this is quite incredible, surprising, and baffling until one tries it out in one's own classes. It is no different in German than mathematics. We too assign too much work. Our revised syllabus is a step in the right direction, namely cutting down the requirement and

* If we fall people let us do it in the earliest courses and make the mortality in the later courses *extremely low*.

* School Review, Vol. XX, No. 8, pp. 505-515.

raising the quality of results. It enables us to increase the number and types of exercises on those essentials without which one can not go far in German. But we also do too much hearing of recitations and not enough teaching, i. e., showing students how to attack a given piece of work. If there is good argument for placing good students in a section by themselves, there is an even better one for doing the same for the poorer ones. As a matter of fact, working with very poor minds is one of the very best ways of learning how to teach, because a poor mind requires a thing stated in its simplest form; and simplification is certainly one of the most fundamental traits of good pedagogy. Supervised study for poorer students has been one of the most admirable characteristics of the German work in the University High School and accounts, in large measure, for the very low number of failures in the courses.

Let us stop here for a moment to analyze in some detail some specific examples of the type of thing, which baffles a poor student.

(a) In the second lesson of a widely used grammar, fourth revised edition, are given the sixteen forms of the definite article in four cases, three genders, singular and plural. One sometimes wonders what goes on in the minds of students who are expected to fathom that sort of thing. Pretty much the same thing, one imagines, which Mark Twain has so clearly portrayed in his essay, "That awful German language." I am citing this as an example of the multiplicity of grammatical elements which our *poorest* students have to fathom — it is certainly not much better for the *good ones*. If we follow the problem one step further, we find that in a more recent beginners' text, the author, facing this problem, spreads out these cases over somewhat more ground. The first lesson contains the nominative and accusative singular of the indefinite article, the next the same cases for the definite article, the third the genitive and the fourth for the dative — all this within a compass of some twenty pages. That is, to be sure, a big improvement. But when we stop to think that none of these inflections occur in English, that the application of these inflections requires a great amount of drill, and that good pedagogy aims to keep confusing material — in this instance the several cases — apart, then we clearly see that the amount of time between these cases should be even more ample. This holds true for all students alike, but most particularly for the poor one who should not be so confused.

(b) Take another illustration. One of the most confusing things in German grammar is the application of the various lists of prepositions. Even the Germans themselves find difficulties with them. I daresay almost fifty per cent of all errors are prepositional in character. Now why? One of the reasons lies in the fact certainly that text books gen-

erally treat the three main groups in three successive lessons and these without sufficient exercises.

There are, to be sure, hopeful signs in the recent additions to direct-method texts. In analyzing seven of the most widely used texts, four were found to keep these preposition lessons far apart. Of the other three, one text gives one group on page 39, the second on 57, and the third on 62. Another text gives the first preposition group on page 54, the second on page 71, and the third on 76. The remaining text gives the first group on page 119, the second on 120, and the third on 128. * I cite these books because they are among our best elementary texts. And yet we see that some of them do not keep these confusing elements sufficiently apart.

We might go on almost indefinitely to show the difficulties in the way of a poor mind, particularly in those phases of the work where absolutely new habits have to be formed which are not at all duplicated in English. Word order, the adjective declension, the three modes of address, the differences in plural inflection, to mention but a few, — these are bewildering to a poor mind.

We cannot blame the text books entirely. We've got to take what we have. Taking these for granted, what must we do?

(a) We must increase the number of exercises about the essentials and omit any extraneous materials that are likely to confuse. There is no text book as yet published that has sufficient practice material of this character. *Repetition is the keyword toward making things automatic and the one way to learn a linguistic element is to make it habitual.*

(b) We must also have supervised study. It is the best means for showing the teacher the actual difficulties under which students work. It will indicate often what elements confuse and cloud the issue, and suggest means as to how these can be avoided. It will show how long assignments actually are. It will aid us in understanding individual students better. It will help us formulate how certain things should be attacked. It will, in other words, be real teaching, i. e., showing a student how to become independent with the materials in hand.

(c) We must have smaller classes. A poll of the members of the committee of this conference, engaged in secondary work, elicits the following figures:—A has 280 students, six classes, an average of 46, the largest class 54; B has 188 students, six classes, an average of 31, the largest class 39; C has 150 students, five classes, an average of 30, the largest class 36; D has 140 students, five classes, an average of 28,

* In justice to these texts it must be said of course that there have been examples of such prepositional sentences before the pages cited. My point is that the lessons devoted to *fixing* the groups are too near one another.

the largest class 40. These figures must then be placed alongside those more ideal ones in the University of Chicago High School, where a teacher of German, with four classes, has classes, averaging 16 and probably never has a total of over 70. It should be noted, incidentally, that A, cited above, has just four times the total number of students as any one of the University High School teachers!

(d) And we must departmentalize. I know precisely what many of you think. You will argue on temperaments and freedom of the individual teacher and theory without end. Those of us who have become convinced of the departmental idea, once argued in much the same fashion. But people really interested in their profession will, can, and have thrown temperaments to the winds and produced results, not possible under any but a departmentalized scheme. It is worth all the time, energy, sacrifice that it costs. Uniform texts, departmental examinations, agreed on by all instructors, uniform aim, within limits similar methods of attack — these will do wonders. These methods will be particularly helpful to the poorer student who cannot then go from one instructor to another and claim with perfect justice, as he can now, "We never had that!"

These, then, are in brief fashion, some of the suggestions for our poorer students. In so far as they are of value to the poorest students, they will be incalculably helpful also for the best. The fundamental principles of simplicity, clarity, lack of confusing elements, repetition — these are learning processes, applicable to all minds!

Conclusion.

In conclusion one thing more in the nature of a reminder! Secondary education is undergoing a reorganization. In that reorganization every type of subject matter is on trial. It is no longer sufficient to say in behalf of a certain subject that it has been for a long time in the curriculum, hence ought to remain there. Among others, modern language teaching is under fire. It has not functioned efficiently. It is easy to blame the university for lack of facilities in preparing teachers. It is easy to blame the administration for large and unwieldy classes. Both are culpable of course. But let's take stock a minute — we who are doing the actual teaching. The standard of modern language teaching must be raised. We cannot go on as we have in the past — let there be no question about that. To go on as we have is to be doomed! Very well, who is to raise those standards? The universities and the administrative officers of our schools can and must bear their share of this responsibility. But ours is the largest share. We believe in our work, otherwise we should not be in it. If it is worth while—and it is—then let us take a new start and hasten to put our house in order. The day of judgment is coming—may we not be found wanting!